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Prospects of American Radicalism

by Bert Cochran

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Prospects of American Radicalism

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MODERN AMERICAN LABOR RADICALISM was born out of the savageries of the buccaneer capitalism of the post-Civil War epoch, and announced itself in full-throated fashion in the bitterly fought rail strikes of 1877. This radicalism—whether tinted or dominated by Marxism, or of the American populist variety—has had many ups and downs, and has reasserted itself in innumerable forms and variations in the seventy-five year interval. But after three-quarters of a century of innumerable experiences, the American working class—the largest in the world—is still without its own political party, still adheres to the philosophy of capitalism, and dutifully supports the capitalist parties on election day. The anti-capitalist left wing is weak and isolated.

This is not because American workers are congenitally wedded to capitalism at all. Labor radicalism had reached great heights in certain periods. The Socialist Party from 1904 to the first world war was a mass movement. The IWW flashed its blinding light across the horizon in this same decade. At a later period, the Communist Party was registering great successes for a few years with the rise of the CIO.

But the rock on which radicalism in America repeatedly

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broke its head was the lack of constancy, the lack of sustained interest on the part of big groups of workers in opposition to the capitalist system. So, the graph of the organized Socialist opposition would in a broad general way reflect the ups and downs of the economic cycle. And as American capitalism exhibited a remarkable vigor throughout these decades, overcame every depression with a period of new stormy growth, and provided the American worker with the highest standard of living in the world, American radicalism, in contrast to its European counterparts, has time and again found itself reduced to a sect.

It was the 1929 economic crisis that smashed up this capitalist idyll, and started the Europeanization of American capitalism. The special highly favored positions of the past had disappeared. The virgin continent had been conquered and ravaged. The laws of capitalism, discovered by Karl Marx a century before, were remorselessly at work in the United States as elsewhere. The economic system came grinding almost to a dead stop. National income was slashed in half by 1932. Banks were failing from one end of the country to the other. Wages were cut right and left. 20 million unemployed roaming the highways and byways. Farmers driven off their land. Hoovervilles springing up on the edges of the cities. The American people, living in the richest country in the world, reduced to penury and degradation, with fear and despair stalking the land.

As many economists and sociologists have since demonstrated, the 1929 crisis was not just another cyclical depression. It was a fundamental crisis of a declining world system.

OUT OF THAT AGONY came later the wave of strikes which boiled up to a veritable civil war in a host of industries and cities, the like of which had never been seen in this country. And out of that class warfare came the modern industrial union movement, the CIO. For the first time, the American working class was solidly

organized in the basic mass production industries. For the first time, the organized unions represented not a small minority of a favored aristocracy of labor, but embraced the heart of the working population.

The victory was great. Wages were improved. The shop steward system revolutionized working relationships inside the plants. The hitherto atomized and helpless working masses emerged as a power, and decisively altered the face of dozens of American cities.

Marxists, and as a matter of fact, radicals of all stripes, placed great hopes in this new crusading movement, and thought that the new experiences were driving the American workers to class consciousness. But this movement, so full of militancy and high promise in its first years, deteriorated badly with America's entrance into the war. The masses meekly followed their capitalist masters into the slaughter. There wasn't even anything resembling the anti-war protest of the pacifists and Debs Socialists of 1917. In the next few years, as the original aggressiveness of the ranks subsided, the new unions got badly bureaucratized. The CIO officers vied with their older AFL cousins as top-sergeants in charge of the labor forces for the war effort. Today, the CIO and AFL leaderships are indistinguishable in their political outlook.

On the other side, what Roosevelt was unable to accomplish with all his NRA codes, WPA's and New Deal legislation, American capitalism achieved through the war—it put the people to work. America entered a period of triumphant boom. The working labor force rose to dizzy heights going over the 60 million mark. The gross national product mounted with each year until it was double in 1948 what it was in 1929. Real wages rose 20 percent over 1939. What with overtime, two breadwinners in many families and the like, American people began buying washing machines, television sets, automobiles on a scale never equalled in the country's history.

This prosperity goes a long way to explain the ease with which the new bureaucracy fastened itself on the unions, and with which the capitalist powers—that-be

thrust the country into the witch-hunt. The sum total of these factors contrived to leave the revolutionary movement high and dry, in its most isolated position since the early Twenties.

DOES NOT ALL THIS add up to a crushing refutation of the Marxist thesis, and confound radicals of all varieties and hues? Is not American capitalism, far from declining, making right now its most spectacular advances?

American imperialism has certainly displayed an ability to prolong the boom beyond many people's expectations. But the whole vast structure of this titan rests, like the house in the fairy tale, on chicken legs. The country resembles more and more a secluded enclave of plenty in a raging sea of misery. With about 6 percent of the world's population, the United States share of world income rose from 26 to 40 percent in the two decades up to 1948, and the United States and Canada accounted for half the world's industrial output in that year. These statistics have their political counterpart in the fact that the United States remains the only solvent, half-stable power in the disrupted system of world imperialism, and the only one which can still command national unity at home.

But even internally, the boom exhausted itself in reality by 1949. All the special, artificial factors of war shortages, war savings, huge loans and give-away programs and armaments production notwithstanding, the country was headed for a depression at the end of 1949. Some may recall how Truman was speechifying in those days—just like some of the Republican speeches we hear today—about the “healthy” aspects of a “readjustment.” An industrial reserve army of 3 to 4 million was back with us, and the country seemed to be moving down the toboggan slide towards life in the Thirties.

It was the Korean war that sent war expenditures soaring again from 14 to 50 billion dollars annually and gave the jaded system another stiff shot in the arm. But once

you start living on a diet of dope, you need constantly larger doses to keep you going. Employment and living standards were maintained for only four years by this enormous outlay for war production. And now the system is headed downward again just as at the end of 1949—on the basis, not of a 14 billion, but a 50 billion dollar war budget!

This demonstrates not the stability of the American economy and the soundness of the boom, but on the contrary its feverish, spasmodic and precarious character, resting as it does on direct and indirect exploitation of the rest of the capitalist world, and the unending expansion of the war sector.

IS IT CORRECT TO SAY therefore that we are moving toward a 1929-type crash again? With all due respect to the intellectual retainers of the capitalist masters, that veritable army of economists, sociologists, psychologists, public relations experts, sloganeers and what have you; with all due respect to this mob of hirelings and their fancy theories about "built-in protective devices" and "cushions"—sounds like an ad for automobile upholstery; were the system permitted to proceed in accordance with its "built-in" economic laws, that's exactly where it would be heading: towards a 1929-type crash, and probably within a very few years, at that. And yet, I don't believe we will see a depression of that depth. I don't believe it because I think the American multimillionaires will unleash the third world war when they see the system heading for the economic reefs.

Charles E. Wilson, the man who opined what's good for General Motors is good for the country—and he's a pretty authoritative spokesman of the Economic Royalty—made a speech a couple of years ago at the University of Michigan where he said he didn't believe the system could survive another Hoover depression. I agree with him. I don't think it could. The system would be finished. There would be revolutions in Western Europe. The colonial revolt would blaze fiercely through Asia and Africa. And

the United States would be in the throes of class warfare. That is why I believe the American policy makers will go to war when they face the economic abyss.

This being the case, and this being the reality confronting us, don't let's get too hypnotized by the false flush of prosperity in the past decade. Don't let's lose our heads and sense of proportion because people have had steady jobs and brought home good pay checks. We have had to take the paychecks with a large dose of McCarthyism. And even so, it's not going to last. At the end of the road is a cataract of horrors of atomic war.

RIGHT NOW A TREMOR OF UNEASINESS is passing through the ranks, and even the leaders of union labor, as they watch the uninterrupted progress of McCarthyism, and as they get worried about another depression. But McCarthyism will continue its triumphal march until it is confronted with a counter-force. The witch-hunt will catapult to ever dizzy heights and encompass ever greater numbers of victims. The demands of the Garrison State are due to become more ruthless and oppressive. Reaction is on the march on all fronts. And finally, war itself will bring disaster, death and destruction.

Out of this awful crucible will come the great change in America. A great, profound change. A change in the people's thinking, a change in their attitude toward the system, a change in their attitude toward the government, a change in their attitude toward the war. This working class, which is today so conservative and sluggish, will grow radical, and amaze the whole world, as it did in 1936, with its combativity and daring. Don't let us forget that this class, starting from a point of no organization, built, in the short space of five years, the most powerful union organizations in the world. Don't let us forget that this class, helpless and defenseless when the '29 crisis broke over its head, and believing up to that point in rugged individualism, absorbed so well some of the elementary truths of modern life and their own position, that by 1936 they seized plants, they organized

mile-long picket lines, they humbled legislatures by their massed might, they overwhelmed the barons of industry by their sheer weight. Talk about militancy and mass action. Jack London wrote at the turn of the century works of fiction about general strikes and future struggles, and even Socialists thought at the time that he was only a romancer and rhapsodist. Yet nothing he conjured up fictionally compared with the majestic sweep of the CIO in its formation.

WHAT FORMS WILL the new radicalization take, how will it differ from the past, and who will lead it?

The new leftward swing will very likely be introduced with a whole series of strikes against the economic consequences of war preparations, or the war itself. As these mount in intensity, the capitalists will turn on the labor movement with old-time ferocity, and proceed to break strikes and bust unions with traditional lack of inhibition and violence. At one point or another, the movement of protest will assume national proportions, and the cry become universal for the creation of a shield to ward off the menacing attack. That may be the moment when a new political party of the laboring people is launched. It is thus at least probable that the first organizational form of the next wave of radicalization will be the establishment of a labor party under the aegis of an important section of labor union officials, most likely in alliance with liberal politicians of the Hubert Humphrey type.

Actually, the American working class has made progress even along this line in the last twenty years, even though its political development has been very slow, certainly far slower than radicals hoped for, and at times, even freely predicted. Let us fix the high points of this process in our minds in order better to understand the present position and direction:

In the Twenties, the working class, outside of the small minority of skilled craftsmen, was unorganized and politically dispersed. The movements of the past, like Debs Socialism, had disintegrated, and capitalist politics had a

monopoly of the field. Roosevelt's election gave an impetus to and coincided with the mass political upheaval. Great struggles swept over the country in the so-called NRA wave—but there was also great inexperience, great naivete, an absence of authentic leaders. The new political awakening took the form of a pathetic dependence on Roosevelt and a childish faith in his disinterested championship of the people's cause.

Two years of sell-outs of all the major NRA strikes in the open-shop industries put the iron in the workers' souls. The masses in the basic industries found themselves still without organization and protection. The "Blue Eagle" promises of a "New Deal" for the workingman had not been forthcoming. The seething in the ranks split the leadership of the AFL and led to the formation of the CIO. Shortly thereafter came the second great upheaval, beginning with the sit-down strikes in Akron and continuing without letup until the defeat of the Little Steel strike in the fall of 1937, which coincided with the "Roosevelt recession."

By now the relationship in the camp of the New Deal had drastically altered. Millions of working men and women were organized in solid phalanxes, disposing of massive power. The support of Roosevelt continued unabated. His personal popularity even grew. But the millions of labor were no longer just a shapeless mass of worshipping pilgrims burning incense at the shrine of their patron saint. They had advanced to the position of an organized sector of an American backdoor variety of People's Front coalition.

A special confluence of circumstances here conspired to nurture the Roosevelt myth and keep it green over many years. A virgin working class, with no conception of class politics or its own potential strength, could never forget that the New Deal established the political climate which made possible the building of the new unions, and that then, for over a decade, living standards rose and the main labor bodies were registering impressive gains. These material benefits sanctified the pro-Roosevelt policies of

the labor union officialdom. The Roosevelt myth encompassed two things: that Roosevelt was the great white father, and that the alliance with the Democratic party accounted for the gains since 1935, and was the only sound course on which future progress could be based.

GEORGE MEANY, AFL President, in a recent interview printed in *U.S. News & World Report*, assured his questioner that the AFL still conforms to Gompers' political line "1,000 percent." It is doubtful that Meany really believes this. In any case, there is not much truth in it. The trade union leaders continue to practice capitalist politics. In that sense, it can be said they are followers of Gompers' bad tradition. But there is a whale of a difference between the present AFL-CIO relation to the political parties and politics, and the endorsement in Gompers' time of some local candidates by a central labor union representing a few thousand, or a few tens of thousands at the extreme, of building-trades men, printers and machinists.

Beginning with Lewis's setting up of Labor's Non-Partisan League in 1936, there has been a steady emphasis and evolution of the *organizational* side of labor's political structure. In 1943, the CIO-PAC was founded under Hillman, and in 1948, the AFL followed suit with the formation of the LLPE. In actuality, the labor unions have the strength and experience, so that they could pull out of the Democratic party tomorrow morning and set up a labor party with scarcely any additional organizational efforts required. The membership, the money, the organizing personnel are there to do it. The only thing lacking is the political understanding, the program, the leadership.

I know people don't just want to hear about the basic trends, but want to be told what will happen next month, or preferably next week, or better yet, tomorrow. Here, I regret I cannot report any rapid-fire moves for a labor party. As a matter of fact, our militants inform us that the anti-labor offensive and the advance of McCarthyism under the Republicans have momentarily refurbished the

glitter of the Democratic politicians for the union ranks and reinforced their attachment to a coalition policy. The timorousness of the self-styled "labor statesmen" in the face of the reactionary sweep has served to weaken labor's position even inside the Democratic party in the wake of the 1952 defeat, rather than strengthening it as the most important grouping of that machine. But it is safe to say that this is only a transient phase. Once the winds of economic distress begin to blow more fiercely, the whole rickety coalition setup will be subjected to unbearable stresses and strains. A new political realignment will no longer be postponed.

You might say, suppose a labor party is created, what is so inspiring about a labor party led by Meany and Reuther, Dubinsky and Potofsky? Where is Socialism ahead with this crew? Well, the cause of Socialism would surely perish were it to depend on any one or all of these "statesmen." Neither am I one of those who would suggest that a labor party will be led at the first stage by a different kind of people. I am not a member of the fraternity who mouth phrases about a revolutionary labor party. Nevertheless, I am convinced that labor's break with capitalist politics would have marked revolutionary consequences, despite its initial leadership.

I RECALL IN THIS CONNECTION the importance of the radicals in the first formative years of the CIO, not only the organized fractions of the left-wing parties, but many unattached individual left-wingers. They played an enormous role, out of all proportion to their numbers. Radicalism fused for a short period with the native militancy of the workers in the shops—and the alliance worked wonders while it was in operation.

No matter that after the first few years a more fundamental program was needed to keep the movement in progress—and that such a program was lacking. No matter that the old core of CIO militants was soon absorbed into the new labor bureaucracy, or smothered in the Stalinist embrace, or dispersed in a dozen different directions.

No matter that the radical who deserved so much credit for building the CIO unions became *persona non grata* in the later stages. The role of American Marxism, and of the Marxist cadre was clearly foreshadowed in these first years of turbulence and upsurge. And when the American workers take their destiny into their hands again, it is a foregone conclusion that the left-wingers will be, from the first, an important factor in the new advance, and a respected voice in the councils of the organization.

Because a labor party—if one is formed—will arise in the midst of the smoke and ruin of war and economic catastrophe, at a time when the political problems of our society cannot be evaded. In contrast to the CIO experience, the role of the Left will not be a passing one, because the American system is heading into the historical crisis that has gripped the rest of the world, and will no longer be able to keep the allegiance of the people. It will be increasingly forced to maintain its rule by terror, oppression, fascism or military dictatorship—or for intervals, through laborite intermediaries and coalitions. That is why American radicalism from the transient enterprise that it has been since the Civil War is due to emerge as the authentic expression of labor's aspirations and struggles. That is the new perspective and reality.

Will the Stalinists make a comeback in the new resurgence and take over the leadership of the left wing in the labor party movement as they did in the course of the CIO upheaval? Of course, discussions of this kind have an element of the speculative about them, but personally, I don't think they will. I do not base my opinion primarily on the betrayals that the Stalinists perpetrated. I am aware that new generations of militants are not as well acquainted with that as we are. I know further that Stalinist betrayals did not bar their emerging as mass parties in Italy and France after the war. And the present unrestrained baiting and persecution of them—if they survive it—may well redound to their benefit at a later stage of radicalization. "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church."

But every country has its own national peculiarities and unique forms of development. There is no uniformity. Stalinist resurgence after the war was not a universal phenomenon. It was not the fulfillment of some kind of historical law. It occurred in France and Italy because of the convergence of specific circumstances. It did not take place in England, West Germany, Belgium or Holland.

I know that in the United States numbers of advanced workers were growing hostile to the Stalinists, and the latter had been losing some ground, especially in the unions, before the red scare started. It is likely that the next wave of radicalization will coincide with crises in a number of Stalinist parties, and revolts against Stalinist rule, on the order of what happened in East Germany; in other words, when Stalinism is losing its attractive power. I envisage the initial wave of radicalization in America taking place through the organized unions, the workers moving massively through their organizations. I envisage the next stage as one of differentiation and growing opposition to the official labor bureaucracy, and can see that as taking the form of an American variety of Bevanism, with the second stage coming hard on the heels of the first. I can visualize a development along this line, because I believe there will arise along with radicalization, a progressive opposition to the Stalinists, and because no existing left-wing group, including the Stalinists, has any real hold on the American labor ranks.

WE OF THE SOCIALIST UNION OF AMERICA have in our membership some of the cream of the generation of the past CIO battles. We have set up this new organization as a culmination of our two-year struggle inside the old Trotskyist organization, the Socialist Workers Party. That old group of leaders have exhausted their progressive mission. Their old role as popularizers of Trotsky's struggle and writings is played out. These men could not adapt their thinking to the new world of the Soviet bloc and the cold war. They have succumbed to their

prolonged isolation. They are bewildered by the new problems to which they have no answers. They are solving their disorientation by infantile bragging, and high-sounding declamations and posturings. They are delivering ultimatum to the labor movement, which are not only universally ignored, but pass completely unnoticed. And they are keeping themselves and their followers hopped up with a lot of crackpot antics which they call "mass campaigns." The SWP represents the new SLP'ism of the American radical movement. It will shrivel up and become increasingly a haven for screwballs and bigots.

Cannon and others deserve a lot of credit for breaking with Stalinism twenty-five years ago and bringing the message of Trotsky to America. They deserve a lot of credit for gathering a cadre of militants to struggle for it. But their bent in recent years to ignore the actual trends and to counterpose their tiny, unknown organization to the actual struggle has spelled disaster. They have now turned their backs on the world and its problems, and have resolved to dwell in their own ivory tower, with their own "ordained leaders," and their own holy scripture. The SWP leaders have become museum pieces. We will not meet them too often in the days to come. Let the dead bury their dead.

We, as a Marxist cadre, conceive our task today as an educator of broader ranks of workers and intellectuals, and as a catalyst in the existing movements and struggles. We believe that the great teachings of the Marxist masters have to be applied in terms of the new social problems of our lifetime and the current tasks of American labor. In the light of the present reaction and witch-hunt, we have to direct our message to those specific circles that are prepared to listen and give us a hearing. Where, in a city like New York, the biggest aggregation of militants is to be found in the so-called Stalinist-front movements, we have to penetrate these circles and work together with their activists. In the country as a whole, we have to elicit the attention and sympathy of the most advanced workers in the unions. Marxism has to become known not as a

dead dogma, not a set of quotations, but the keenest analysis of the social reality and a living answer to the problems of the day. The Marxist cadre, if it does its work well, will have the opportunity of fusing with other left wing currents as they arise in the course of the coming conflicts. Not by boasting that we are the "chosen few," and that the holy petroleum has been poured over our heads, but by aligning ourselves with the actual struggles of our generation, will we become a factor in the creation of the mass revolutionary party of tomorrow.

WE ARE PART OF THE STREAM OF HISTORY.

We are confident of our future because we believe we have the correct understanding and tactic, and because we know we have the body of militants with the grit and tenacity to carry on. Do not anybody despair because of our small numbers, or because the movement of the left in general is so isolated today. We are like the American abolitionists of a hundred years ago. We are like Garrison and Wendell Phillips and Frederick Douglass and John Brown, who were on the side of truth and justice and whose aims coincided with the line of historical progress. The abolitionists, for years, were only a handful preaching to indifferent and often jeering crowds. The circulation of Garrison's paper, the *Liberator*, was insignificant. John Brown was reviled as a lunatic and hanged as a common felon. But a few years later his name was on a nation's lips, and Union soldiers storming the ramparts of the South were singing the famous battle hymn: "John Brown's body lies a-moulderin' in the grave; but his soul goes marching on."

These men—these great men—earned fame and immortality, and their crusade triumphed because they were intrepid fighters and heroes of vast stature, and because—what is decisive—the anti-slavery cause coincided with the line of march of the American republic. And the cause that we espouse, the cause of Socialism, will conquer, because it too coincides with the needs of humanity and the moving line of history.

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